

Presentation to
Mr. Howard A. Perry

by

George Loring Porter Jr.

Albany, N. H.

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SOME EXTRACTS

FROM

"THE TRAGEDY OF THE NATION"

(Copyrighted)

BY THE AUTHOR,

DR. GEORGE LORING PORTER,

OF BRIDGEPORT, CONN.

Delivered before the Army and Navy Club, at New London, June 22, 1900



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“THE TRAGEDY OF THE NATION”

Mr. Toastmaster, Comrades of the Club, and welcome representatives of the better half of creation :

I invite your attention to past history in order that your minds may be assured of certain facts which have not generally been recorded. When the consternation and dismay occasioned by the murder of Lincoln and the attempted assassination of all the chief officers of the nation, almost paralyzed the government, in the provisional council it was asked, “In whom can we now safely place confidence?” Gen. Grant answered, “Trust those who have proven themselves trustworthy in the field.” General Hancock was appointed Provost Marshal General of Washington, General Hartranft Special Provost Marshal or Military Governor of the old Penitentiary, where the conspirators were confined, and four regiments of the Veteran Reserve Corps constituted the guard. By special order of the Secretary of War, I was placed in medical charge, and was the only person who had authority to visit the prisoners at all times. I performed the required professional duties until the sentences of execution or imprisonment were enforced.

I had unequalled opportunities for observation and information, and as I am, to the best of my knowledge, the only officer now living of those who had immediate charge, I have prepared a lecture entitled “The Tragedy of the Nation,” describing the personnel of the conspirators, and the development and execution, as known to the Secret Service and in part presented at the trial, of the plot which resulted in the death of President Lincoln.

I was the only commissioned officer present at the disposition of Booth's body ; and desire, in this official manner, to put upon record the statement, subject to proof, that the descriptions of that incident which have been published from time to time are incorrect, and this characterization particularly applies to one of the latest, which appeared in McClure's Magazine of May, 1897. The article was by R. S. Baker, thus indorsed by Mrs. (or Miss) Ida M. Tarbell, “as not only historically accurate, but such as would be impossible save from one who had received his information first hand from one of the leading actors.” Upon the 8th of May, 1897, I notified the indorser that the description of this occurrence was intrinsically ludicrously and actually inaccurate, but no correction has yet been made.

Complying with the invitation of your efficient secretary, Colonel

Knowlton, I present selections from the lecture, which is itself copyrighted.

All here have doubtless a general knowledge of the most tragical event in our national history, the assassination of President Lincoln ; but the intervening thirty-five years, together with partial and interested accounts, have so obscured the actual occurrences that few are familiar with the development of the plot, the personality of the conspirators, the spirit of the times, the injury of the victims, the character of the trial, or the fate of the criminals.

My time is too limited to present the facts which demonstrate the conception and growth of the conspiracy. The North was honey-combed with traitorous, semi-military societies, with an estimated membership of over two hundred thousand. To direct their actions President Davis had established in Canada what was called "Davis' Canada Cabinet," composed of able and unscrupulous men who hesitated at no deed of brutality or crime. In the spring of 1865 the downfall of the Confederacy was assured unless some master stroke secured independence.

To assassinate Lincoln was no new conception. It was plotted to kill him in Baltimore on his way to his first inauguration in 1861. Threatening letters were constantly received at the White House, but the brave man told his friends that he could not possibly guard against these personal dangers; that by the hand of a murderer he could only die once, while to go continually in fear would be to die over and over. "I see no other way than to be always prepared to die. I know my danger, but a man must not care how and where he dies, provided he dies at the post of honor and duty."

In the Selma Dispatch of December 1, 1864, there was published an offer to assassinate Lincoln, Seward, and Johnson, for one million dollars—fifty thousand dollars for preliminary expenses, the total amount when the deed was performed. In January, 1865, one of the Canada Cabinet stated that he had bold, daring men who proposed to execute the plan. On the 6th or 7th of April, John H. Surratt arrived in Montreal with dispatches from Richmond for the Canadian leaders. Within two days two hundred thousand dollars were withdrawn from the Montreal branch of the Ontario Bank, and Surratt returned in haste to Washington, there to meet Booth.

John Wilkes Booth, Mrs. Mary E. Surratt, her son, John E. Surratt, instigated by the Confederate cabal in Canada, and some of the civil authorities in Richmond (for the Southern soldiers were not implicated), were the prime movers in the plot. Booth was of an erratic and undisciplined disposition, inheriting some histrionic ability from the great actor, his father, the elder Booth. He was a good looking young man, of much personal magnetism, fond of good clothes, high living, and fast company ; flush with his money, fond of admiration, and reckless, and low in his dissipations and company ; shirking all systematic work, and covetous of achieving celebrity by some notorious act. The

Canadian Confederates stimulated this morbid ambition with assurances that by accomplishing the removal of Lincoln he would secure the affection of the Southern people and the admiration of the world.

The Surratts were principally actuated by sympathy for the South and by bitter hatred of the Union cause. These three, and all their assistants, expected large pecuniary rewards. During the summer and autumn of 1864 and the winter of 1865, Booth and Surratt often visited Canada, consulting with Thompson and the others, and, upon returning to Washington, spent much time in the counties of Maryland bordering upon the Potomac, becoming familiar with the roads over which Booth subsequently made his escape.

Booth selected for his assistants David E. Herold, George A. Atzerodt, Lewis Payne, Edward Spangler, and Dr. Samuel A. Mudd.

Herold was an insignificant young man, hardly more than a boy, whose school days had been spent in Charles county, Maryland, who had been at times a druggist's clerk in Washington, and who had been picked up by Booth to run his errands and attend to his horses, and was much elated by associating with the actor.

Atzerodt, called "Port Tobacco," was a dissipated hanger-on of Washington saloons, and often engaged in smuggling across the Potomac; loud in his cups, savage in threats, but a craven in action. He was to have assassinated at the Kirkwood House Vice-President Johnson, and had there taken a room in which were afterwards found, hidden in the bed, the revolver and bowie-knife which Booth had given him, and hanging on the wall was the overcoat belonging to Booth and containing his Canada bankbook.

When the conspirators separated at the theater for the performance of their respective crimes, Atzerodt did not return to the hotel, but after wandering about the streets tried to escape through upper Maryland and was arrested in Montgomery county, April 20th. He offered to turn State's evidence.

Payne was sent from Canada in February, remaining the first night in Washington, at the house of Mrs. Surratt, and three weeks later remained there for three days. He was a brutal type of guerrilla trooper, of great strength and agility, deep chested and broad shouldered, with an enormous neck and comparatively small head, ferocious, but of little wit. At first he had been by lot selected to kill Lincoln, but afterwards he was assigned to murder Seward.

Arnold had been a soldier. He had been one of the early conspirators with Booth, but growing weary of the often postponed performance, had about a month before gone to Fort Monroe, it was thought at the time to prepare the means of escape for Booth and his party through southeast Virginia.

O'Loughlin was a Confederate deserter, a lover of much whisky and low company. His task was the assassination of General Grant. The General's unexpected departure from Washington prevented the attempt.

Spangler was the least intelligent of all the assistants. was the carpenter of the theater, and was completely under Booth's influence. He probably knew nothing of the plot, but was used by Booth to arrange the fastenings of the doors of the theater box and aid him in his escape from the stage. He thus gave Booth much assistance.

With the exception of Mrs. Surratt, Dr. Mudd was the most intelligent of them all. He lived near Bryanttown, Md., about thirty miles from Washington; had some time previously introduced Booth to John Surratt; had assisted Booth in the purchase of the horse upon which Payne tried to escape; was bitterly opposed to the North because most of his slaves had run away, and was suspected of giving aid and comfort to the enemy. There was no direct evidence that he knew of the assassination until afterwards, but, whether influenced by fear for himself, or by desire for the escape of Booth, he told so many and so contradictory lies about his connection with the affair that he was arrested and tried.

Mrs. Surratt was, with Booth, the life of the enterprise, and her home on H (541) Street was the meeting place of most of the conspirators. She was a good looking widow of about forty-five. She owned a place in Maryland some ten miles below Washington, which she had rented to a man by the name of Floyd. She was said to have been an affectionate mother and a pleasant acquaintance, but she was saturated with the local intensity of hatred against the government. Long before she had said that she would give one thousand dollars to any one that would kill Lincoln. She personally attended to many of the arrangements to facilitate Booth's escape. Upon Tuesday, the 11th, at Booth's request, and at his expense, she went to her house in Maryland, where Herold, Surratt, and Atzerodt had secreted two Spencer carbines and told Floyd "to have those shooting irons handy, as they would be called for before long." Upon the 14th, Friday, the day of the assassination, she again went to see Floyd, taking to him from Booth a field-glass and two bottles of whisky, and told him "to have the shooting irons, etc., ready, as they would be called for that night." After her return about nine o'clock, some one, probably Booth or John Surratt, came to see her, found out that everything was ready at Floyd's, and went directly to the theater.

About ten minutes after the murder, and before it was known in that part of the town, a window in her house was raised, and a woman asked two soldiers what was wrong down town.

The time appointed for Lincoln's death was ten minutes past ten. The local traditions assert that, in the room and on the bed where Lincoln died, that afternoon Booth had tried to take a nap, in preparation for the fatigue of the night.

In the afternoon Booth had also spent some time with Atzerodt at the Kirkewood, and had prepared a card which would have introduced the assassin to the room of the Vice-President. Each of the active conspirators had secured horses for their flight. The others were seen be-

tween nine and ten riding on the avenues, but Booth's horse was held by a boy in a lane back of the theater.

It was generally known in Washington that the President, with a party, was that evening to attend a presentation of "Our American Cousin." Booth had given tickets to some of his friends, and had advised others to be present, telling them that they "would see great acting." There was a chance that the President would leave at the close of the second act. At this time Booth, saying, "I think he will come down now," with two companions aligned themselves upon the sidewalk, intending to shoot Lincoln there, but the President remained in the building.

Booth went into an adjoining saloon, took a drink of whisky, and re-entered the theater. A well dressed man in the crowd cries out the time, and some one rides away. It is Herold on his way to conduct Payne to the house of the Secretary. Herold had been selected to pilot Payne, who was unfamiliar with Washington, through the streets of the city, and the entire party through the byways of Charles County to the Potomac.

Reaching the home of the Secretary, Payne dismounts, hands the bridle to Herold, enters, ostensibly with medicine from Dr. Verdie, for Mr. Seward, by a recent carriage accident, is confined to his bed, in an upper chamber, with a broken arm and a broken jaw. Payne, armed with revolvers and a bowie knife, assaults the son of the Secretary, twice fracturing his skull, bursts into the sick room, slashes at the venerable man on the bed, stabbing him in the neck and nearly cutting off his entire cheek, and attempts to disembowel the faithful soldier-nurse, who, although himself an invalid and maimed, bravely grapples with the infuriated assassin, who is continually shouting, "I am mad, I am mad." Escaping from the room, Payne wounds on the stairway two other persons, leaving in this house of suffering and horror five desperately injured men, and regains the street to find that Herold has deserted him and that his horse is walking away. To catch him is easy work for the guerrilla trooper, but without a guide he rides in vain to find the bridge crossing into Maryland. Spurring rapidly in the darkness, he is thrown from his falling horse, remains for some time unconscious, and for the next two days hides, probably in the Congressional Cemetery. Compelled by hunger, about midnight, April 17th, he returns to the house of Mrs. Surratt. With a laborer's pick in his hand, and a part of his shirt sleeve for a cap (for he had lost his hat when he was thrown) he knocks and is admitted to find himself covered by the pistols of the officers who had come to arrest her. When the two were confronted, she raised her right hand, exclaiming, "Before God, sir, I have not seen that man before. I have not hired him. I do not know anything about him." This voluntary statement was most damaging, for, as before mentioned, Payne was of marked personality, had been a frequent visitor at her house within two months, had remained there for

at least four days sitting at her table and conversing with her. These two were the first arrested.

Again some one spoke the time, "Ten o'clock and five minutes," and the assault at the Kirkwood was to have been made.

Again the voice, louder and clearer than before, cried out, "Ten o'clock and ten minutes." The crowd separated in the lobby, and Booth goes up-stairs in the dress circle. The boxes had, by the removal of a partition, been converted into one for the reception of the party. There was a passage way behind the doors of the box, and a door closed this passage from the gallery. The doors were held by spring locks on the inside. Some one, probably the carpenter Spangler, had withdrawn the screws of the locks, so that the doors could be pushed open; and a mortice had been cut in the wall opposite the outer door so that a brace would prevent any one opening it from the outside. A board for this purpose was left back of the door. Booth pushed by the sentinel at the outer door, saying that the President had sent for him, forced out the screws of the lock, and secured the door with the plank. Standing in the dark passage, through a hole recently reamed out in the inner door he located the members of the party. Lincoln was at the angle of the box away from the stage. Mrs. Lincoln was accompanied by Miss Harris, daughter of Senator Harris, and Major Rathbone, in place of General and Mrs. Grant as was originally intended. The second scene of the third act held the attention of the audience. Unnoticed Booth entered the box, a bowie knife in his left hand, in his right a revolver, its muzzle within three feet of his victim; hastily assured himself that his plan for immediate escape was feasible, and then fired, shouting, "Revenge for the South"; dropped the pistol, transferred the knife to his right hand, and placed his left hand on the balustrade to spring down to the stage twelve feet below. Much practice had made this for him an easy thing. Major Rathbone sprang to seize him, but received a cut laying open the arm from the shoulder to the elbow. Booth leaped to the stage, tearing the decorations at the front of the box, and apparently twisting his ankle partially fell, but immediately rose, turned to the audience, brandished the bloody knife, declaimed, "Sic semper tyrannis," and limped behind the scenes.

It did not take in its whole performance the time I have used in the telling. The report of the pistol was muffled by the heavy draperies, and the audience was not fully aware of the actual events until they saw the smoke coming from the box and heard Mrs. Lincoln's cry of "Murder."

People tried to force open the door, but it was held fast by the brace, and it was not opened until my messmate, Mr. McClay, a lieutenant of the Ordnance Corps, was lifted into the front of the box from the stage. It was intended in the original plan, when the shot was fired, to have all the lights extinguished, allowing the assassin to escape in the darkness, but Booth would not relinquish this opportunity for theatrical display, and thereby made more difficult his escape.

The President was shot behind the left ear, the ball penetrating nearly the entire transverse diameter of the brain, became immediately and permanently unconscious, was removed to a neighboring house, and about seven the next morning painlessly died.

Booth passed to the alley behind the theater, mounted his horse, was joined at the old brick church by Herold, and rode rapidly to the Navy Yard bridge over the Eastern branch of the Potomac, which they approached separately. When challenged, Booth gave his own name—for no general alarm had yet been given—reasoning that when it should be reported, the police would think that some confederate had given it as a blind, so that the real criminal might gain time in escaping some other way. And this was what actually occurred. Fifteen minutes after the crime every telegraph line leading out of Washington, except a government wire to Fort Monroe, was cut, an evidence of the wide ramification of the plot. Herold followed, passing himself off as a farmer returning from an evening in the city. Once over the bridge, they galloped to Floyd's, where Mrs. Surratt, in the afternoon, had left the field-glass and whisky; took these and one of the carbines, and continued their journey into Charles County toward the smugglers' crossing of the lower Potomac.

When Booth jumped from the box, his spur caught in a fold of the flag, and so twisted him in the accustomed leap that the fall broke the small bone of the left leg, and he came near fainting on the stage; but the nerve of the man and the excitement, enabled him to limp off and mount his horse. The pain grew so intense during the weary ride that he could not continue his flight, and they stopped about four o'clock in the morning at the house of Dr. Mudd for rest and treatment of the fractured bone. Here he remained until late in the afternoon, when Mudd and Herold, who had been to the village, where they had seen the pursuing Union cavalry, returned and forced him to hide in the woods. In the thick grove he lay on the cold ground for nearly one hundred and fifty hours before he was taken to a boat on the Potomac; and during this time the pain in the leg grew more severe from poor surgery and out-door exposure, causing high fever and occasional delirium, in which, it is reported, he thought he was visited, for hours at a time, by the murdered President.

The search had now become so hot that those who had been providing for him grew alarmed for their own safety, and in the darkness carried him to the river. Herold paddled across, having first shot their horses. On the Virginia side he was carried in an old wagon to the Rappahannock, where they were met by three of Mosby's officers, one of whom loaned Booth his horse, and they together rode to a farmhouse near Bowling Green. The officers here left them, and Booth and Herold sought shelter in the barn. Before morning it was surrounded by Union cavalry. In the darkness they were summoned to surrender. Herold gave himself up, but Booth refused, saying, however, that if they would give him a distance of a hundred yards, he would come out and fight

the whole party. They answered that they had come to capture and not to fight him. The barn, a sort of tobacco drying shed, the sides of loosely jointed boards, stocked with some little hay, was set on fire; and by this light, contrary to orders, Sergeant Boston Corbett fired, and Booth fell, the bullet penetrating the back of the neck at the junction of the spine with the head, causing entire paralysis of all the voluntary muscles of the body. He was shot in nearly the same spot where Lincoln had been wounded; but in the case of the President, the ball, penetrating the brain, caused unconsciousness, and so prevented pain; whereas with Booth there was constant and excessive pain, and inability to talk and swallow, although he was perfectly conscious and anxious to send messages.

He died about noon upon the 26th of April, realizing that his crime brought to him only infamy and aroused only sentiments of indignation and horror at the North and South alike. His last message was to his mother, telling her that he "died for his country." Among his personal effects was a bill of exchange, in his favor, drawn by the Montreal Branch of the Ontario Bank.

His body was wrapped and sewed up in a horse blanket, taken to the Potomac, and by boat taken to the navy yard at Washington, and there identified by many persons, among them by Dr. May, a distinguished surgeon, who had a short time before removed a tumor from Booth's neck. The body was taken in a row-boat to the Washington arsenal, and in the dead of night, in the presence of the military store-keeper, four enlisted men, and myself—the only commissioned officer—was hidden in a place so secret that never to this day has it been correctly described. We were requested by Secretary Stanton to keep silent, and no man during these thirty-five years has yet told. I believe the body was finally given to the family, under agreement never to mark by bound or monument where it should be placed.

The assassination everywhere created the greatest consternation. The authorities immediately realized that the criminals were simply the degraded tools of some powerful organization, and suspected that the crime might be the signal for the union of the traitorous secret military societies of the North and the rebellious soldiers of the South, and for the inauguration of a civil war that would have no defined boundaries. Suspicion and distrust were universal. Who could be depended upon? The city, for a short time, was almost as if in a state of siege. Strong guards commanded the approaches. No person came or went without careful inspection. Telegraphic communication was soon re-established. Many were suspected and arrested, some of whom were never brought to trial.

With the exception of Booth and Herold, the active conspirators in Washington were speedily captured. Payne was at first confined on a gunboat; and as he had there attempted to commit suicide by knocking his head against a beam, upon removal to the penitentiary he and other prisoners were forced to wear a hood, thickly padded, and open only for the eyes, mouth, and nose. They were all manacled, and placed in

separate cells secured by doors of heavy iron cross bars. At each door was constantly stationed a sentinel, and a company of soldiers was always on guard in the building. In a little while the hoods, acting as sweating baths to the head, caused symptoms of mental trouble in some of the prisoners already debilitated by the nervous tension of past excitement and present fears. I notified Secretary Stanton that, unless the hoods were removed, and exercise permitted in the open air, he would have a lot of lunatics on his hands, and requested medical counsel. You can realize that, young man as I then was, I was unwilling alone to become responsible for the health of twenty or thirty people on trial, in very unusual circumstances, for their lives, and to whom was directed the attention of the civilized world.

Dr. Gray, the head of the Utica Asylum, an alienist of the highest authority, came in response to the invitation of the Secretary, and indorsed my recommendations. The hoods were permanently removed, and two or three hours of exercise in the enclosed yard allowed. At my request they were permitted to have reading matter, Secretary Stanton stipulating that there should be no books or papers furnished that had been printed within thirty years. The selection was at my discretion, and I loaned them mainly stories of Cooper and Dickens. I have been recently assured by a gentleman of New York, who was one of the suspected prisoners, and is now a prominent lawyer, and has been a member of one of the national committees, that in his belief, what I then did for him preserved his reason. I was ordered to make three daily inspections of each of the prisoners, and twice a day to make a written report of their condition to the Secretary of War through General Hartranft.

I will not detain you with the history of the trial. The court convened May 9th, and sent their verdict to the President June 30th. Their findings were approved, and the execution took place July 7th. Herold, Atzerodt, Payne, and Mrs. Surratt were condemned to death, and upon the 7th of July, 1865, were hung upon a double gallows simultaneously, Herold and Atzerodt going to their death like frightened boys, Payne with the coolness of a soldier, Mrs. Surratt, although suffering from nervous exhaustion, with the resignation characteristic of women who wait inevitable death. For her there has naturally been much sympathy, but it should be extended to her memory, not for her death, but for the influences which molded her feelings. She was the only one who properly estimated the enormity of the crime and intelligently and deliberately ventured her own life to destroy that of those who she had been taught to believe had brought about the calamities of the Confederacy. She was no doubt somewhat influenced by the hope that, if her guilty actions should be fully recognized, on account of her sex she might escape capital punishment.

During the war women caught in the performance of acts which would have condemned men to instant death had been liberated with the injunction to be good women and not to do such acts again. The female spies during the war were the most effective members of the Confederate

Secret Service; and the natural results of this mawkish, unmilitary, and unjust sentimentality caused the death of many hundreds of Union soldiers.

It is poor equity to counterbalance an unmerciful condemnation of woman's frailties by a frivolous gallantry in the punishment of woman's crimes. Mrs. Surratt possessed unalterable determination and an overmastering devotion to the Southern cause, and, from my careful observation of her during her imprisonment, would, I believe, have willingly sacrificed her own life to overthrow the Republic,—an heroic but misguided woman.

It is now realized that the assassination, apart from its criminality, was a political blunder. At any previous time it would not have materially changed the conduct of the war except to have made it more bitter and to have inflamed the soldiers with the passion of revenge. From the time of its occurrence it became responsible for many of the difficulties of reconstruction. Commiseration, not unmixed with contempt, is the sentiment entertained for the insignificant instruments who committed the cruel acts, but it must be remembered that their weak intelligence was dominated by powerful minds, who seduced them with specious pleas of loyalty to the South, and tempted them by the promise of enormous rewards.

The burden of the guilt of this political blunder and of this most dastardly murder rests upon those who instigated the crime, and they should never be forgotten nor forgiven. The name of the immediate actor in the useless assassination arouses horror for the deed and the man, not unmixed with pity for his great and final remorse. His inordinate ambition, personal vanity, and low morality, fitted him to become the willing tool for any villainy when under the influence of unscrupulous men.

Recently I visited the locality where we placed his body thirty-five years ago; marked by no memorial, unknown alike to the stranger and to those dwelling in the place, preserved by no record, "unwept, unhonored, and unsung," it is rapidly passing into oblivion.

How different with Lincoln the martyr. To his memory states and nations vie with each other in tributes of honor. To commemorate the goodness and greatness of his character, monuments of marble and granite have been erected. Institutions of learning, benevolence, and business, streets, towns, counties, perpetuate his name. The nation that he loved so dearly and served so well, annually celebrates his birth.

But more enduring than shafts of primeval granite, more honorable and more to be desired than sculptured marble or lettered bronze, are the sentiments of reverence and affection with which he, together with Washington, is enshrined in the hearts of his countrymen. Time ever makes more illustrious their fame.

These typical Americans who, by personal and painstaking efforts, rose from the humble circumstances of their youth to the highest positions of power and responsibility, not only by their personal character

and reputation give dignity and glory to the nation, but create an ever-increasing belief throughout the whole world that the influence of the free institutions of our Republic endows each of its children with opportunity of acquiring that complete education which Milton long ago so scholastically defined:

“A complete education I hold to be one that prepares a man to perform skillfully, wisely, magnanimously, all duties, private and public, in peace and war.”

The tragic death of Lincoln will ever remain a salient event of history. To us who knew the man or were his contemporaries, it has become a sacred memory. It will ever remain to the young an instructive lesson, to the statesman a warning, to the patriot an inspiration, to the philosopher a triumph. For him there is no epitaph better descriptive of his character, his acts, and his life, than his own words:

“I see no other way than to be always prepared to die. I know my danger, but man must not care how and where he dies, provided he dies at the post of honor and duty.”



